

A Poet's Walk Into The Art of Beth Ames Swartz

Margret Carde

*Every angel is terrible. And yet, alas,
I welcome you, almost fatal birds of
the soul, knowing about you.*

Written over sixty-five years ago, much of Rainer Maria Rilke's "Second Duino Elegy"¹ seems eerily descriptive of Beth Ames Swartz's new paintings, *Celestial Visitations*. The angels which have come to Swartz's canvases are not of an ethereal variety. They stretch and twist against the frame of their visitation with a real and muscular energy. From a place of awe similar to that of the poet, the painter also asks her angel subjects: Who are you? The poet answers himself with a catalog of entities strikingly evocative of the swirling vortices Swartz has painted. Each cosmic vortex is both a beginning and an end, a source and a return:

*You early success, coddled darlings of
creation, mountain ranges, ridges
reddened by dawn of genesis, — pollen
of flowering godhead, articulations of
light, corridors, stairways, thrones,
vacant spaces of being, shields of
rapture, tumults of stormy ecstasy,
and suddenly, singly, mirrors which
scoop again their outpoured beauty
back into their own faces.*

Painted with the dynamic effects of Van Gogh's "Starry Night," Swartz's angels sputter forth energy and blessings like fountains or fireworks. Yet, at the same time, they seem to be sucking all that they emit back into themselves:

*For when we feel,
we evaporate. . . .
Does the cosmic space in which we
dissolve taste of us?
Do the angels really seize nothing but
what is theirs,*

*what has streamed from them, or
sometimes, as if by mistake,
is a bit of our being taken with it?
Are we mixed in their features
like the vagueness on the faces of
pregnant women?
They're not aware of it in the whirl
of returning into themselves. . . .*

Part bird, part flower and part agitated personage, Swartz's angels have no heads and their legs are heavy. Mothlike and visceral at the same time, they have hearts throbbing in their centers ("shields of rapture"), and their potency and fertility ("pollen of flowering godhead") is evidenced by genitalia.

Their opulence and hieratic symmetry tell us that they are ancient, and indeed one would have to go back to a prehistoric model to find spirit portrayed as so full of matter. Their form suggests the heavy-thighed, Neolithic goddess statues found throughout "Old Europe" (from the Adriatic to the Black Sea, from the Dnieper River to the islands of the Mediterranean). Often pillar-headed, these Neolithic fetishes combine the sexes into a female figure whose neck extends upward and ends suggestively without the actual definition of a head. As votive figures, they sometimes pose with their arms raised in a paradoxical gesture of vulnerability and awesome power.² If, as some scholars suggest, these statuettes represent the moment of epiphany when the god and the one adoring the god fuse, then they are surely ancestors of Swartz's angels. Shattered mirrors are scattered amid the vivid paintstrokes and flakes of crushed stone which compose the rich surfaces of Swartz's canvases. Thus they "scoop again their outpoured beauty back into their own faces" and "a bit of our being

[is] taken with it" as our fragmented reflection is gathered into the substance of these celestial visitors.

Swartz says that the space in the studio changed when the angels came. Standing in front of "Celestial Visitations #5," I felt what she meant. The mirrors imbedded at different angles reflected fragments of the space around me, but they did not reflect me in any coherent way. This mirrored painting seemed to join the space in front of me with the space behind me. I was included in the space, but I was seemingly disembodied. I felt airy, as if light were going through me, as if I were no longer solid — "For when we feel, we evaporate."

But empathic feeling at this intensity involves more than evaporation. The giving up of ego — which is what is implied, and is what brought Swartz to this body of work — is not without violence, pain and eruption. The mirrored glass is after all shattered. Paint drips like blood over the pheasant breast feathers collaged at the vaginal center of "Celestial Visitations #4." These angels are the outgrowth of a personal crisis and, as the artist says, they have been a long time coming.

Their real beginning was in 1982. Exhausted and stricken with an illness partly attributable to the hazardous processes she used to make her fire

¹Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Duino Elegies*, C. F. MacIntyre, trans., (Berkeley, University of California Press), 1963, pp. 13-19.

²Marija Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*, (Berkeley, University of California Press), 1982, plates 128-30, figs. 130-46.

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paintings (various minerals, sand and earth were combined with processes of burning and burial to produce her extraordinary *Israel Revisited* series) Swartz had reached an empty place. "In every philosophical system," she says, "there is a moment where you can't get any further without surrendering. The Cabbala calls it 'the abyss.' I had reached 'the abyss.' "

But the Chinese also call such moments "dangerous opportunities." For Swartz, the abyss provided the necessity and opportunity to travel new roads. "After the fire paintings, it took me a year and a half to do my next painting," she says. "I was being pressured by deadlines, but, for me, the old processes no longer worked. I had to surrender to this new journey. I had to heal myself; I had no choice. As George Land says, it was 'grow or die.' "³

Swartz's journey led her in many directions. She studied Native American and Far Eastern healing practices, rituals and meditation. She saw the Rothko Chapel in Houston and was impressed

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by its creation of a complete meditational environment. This was comparable, she felt, to the environmental quality she had recognized in the painted Paleolithic

³George Land, *Grow or Die, the Unifying Principle of Transformation*, (Random House, New York), 1974.



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"Celestial Visitations #4" (The Angel of Irrevocable Choice), 5' x 4', mixed media on canvas, 1988, courtesy of Elaine Horwitch Galleries.

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caves in Europe. In both cases, she noted, "the paintings seem to have been done for spiritual renewal not only for the artist but also for the community as a whole." Similarly, her private search for healing and spiritual renewal led eventually to a public environmental work called *A Moving Point of Balance*, whose focus is seven paintings spotlighted in a darkened room.

Entering the space, viewer/participants move around a medicine wheel, the ancient Native American mandala which for centuries has guided individuals and groups into a ritual awareness of the paradox between unique identity and universal wholeness. Continuing into the darkness beyond, one encounters seven color baths located in front of seven spotlighted, seven-foot, square paintings which create seven meditational stations. The paintings represent East Indian chakras. Chakras are energy centers in each human being which are believed to balance and connect body matter with body energy. Red light bathes the viewer looking at the first chakra, "Base of the Spine." Then the following colors and paintings are coupled: orange with "Reproduction"; yellow with "Solar Plexus"; green with "Heart"; blue with "Throat"; indigo with "The Third Eye" and violet with "Crown of the Head." Light-reflective substances (microglitter and glass) cause the painted surfaces to appear luminous. The large scale draws the viewer into the paintings and the organic, internal imagery invites one to feel the focused area of one's own body. The experience can be visceral as well as symbolic.

In the next room, from the research team of Steinberg-Evans-Finch, Swartz uses a modern system of quartz slides projected onto white walls to create an ever-changing light painting. Passage through the darkened rooms of *A Moving Point of Balance* becomes a symbolic rite of passage. In this environmental piece

Swartz proposes an art that can actively heal.⁴

In 1986, having completed the installation of *A Moving Point of Balance*, Swartz returned to the studio. This time the paintings boiled. Figures like flowers and tree trunks encased with glittering matter danced asymmetrically in tension with the paintings' edges. "The figures were so powerful, sexual and physical," reminisces Swartz. "They seemed to be a nonverbal reconnection through my own body with the earth itself." She called this series *Alchemy*.

With its emphasis on transmutation, the *Alchemy* series marked a return to the earth in other ways. In her fire paintings, shoveling earth into the process of painting and burning had been a part of the whole painting ritual. In *Alchemy* the inclusion of ground and pounded azurite, chrysocolla, quartz crystals and shards collected from journeys to ancient ritual sites provided color and texture when imbedded in the paint. They brought with them a cellular memory of their earth origin and the stones are all reputed to have healing qualities. Gathered together these small fragments from distant contexts of time and place have a way of drawing the viewer into each painting's visual and conceptual synecdoches. Like William Blake's "world in a grain of sand," the concentration of stones and shards as the dust and starstuff of which the earth's plants and creatures are composed produces a sense of what Gaston Bachelard calls "intimate immensity."⁵

In *Celestial Visitations*, *Alchemy* and *A Moving Point of Balance* the painter asks the viewer to travel between the world of interior imagination where solid and space are not separate and the exterior world where such things are less distinct than we commonly suppose. These paintings insist on a reverence for all of life's connections and require that we reach

inside to find the place in each of us where birth and death join hands and wave and particle exchange their roles.

Of course the knowledge — the epiphanies — attended upon by these angels is fleeting. It's hard to make the awareness they bring a permanent part of our consciousness in a world of street signs, hot dogs and errands. Perhaps it is something we can only half know. In Wallace Stevens's "Angel Surrounded by Paysans" the celestial visitor calls itself "the angel of reality" and then explains:

Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,
Since, in my sight, you see the earth
again,
Cleared of its stiff and stubborn,
man-locked set,
And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic
drone
Rise liquidity in liquid lingerings,
Like watery words awash; like
meanings said
By repetitions of half-meanings.
Am I not,
Myself, only half of a figure of a sort,
A figure half seen, or seen for a
moment, a man
Of the mind, an apparition appalled in
Apparels of such lightest look that a turn
Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly,
I am gone?⁶□

⁴*A Moving Point of Balance* is a non-commercial, environmental work which will travel throughout this country and Europe through 1992. It began its tour in September at the University of Arizona Museum of Art in Tucson.

⁵Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (Boston Beacon Press), 1969, 1984.

⁶Wallace Stevens, "Angel Surrounded by Paysans," in *Poems*, (Vintage Press, New York), 1959, p. 153.

"Celestial Visitations" by Beth Ames Swartz was presented April 21 through May 10, 1988 at the Elaine Horwitch Galleries, Scottsdale.

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